

BENIN 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government respected religious freedom.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief or practice. Societal respect for religious diversity and differing affiliations was widespread, though there were reports of occasional conflict requiring police intervention between Voodoo practitioners and Christians that were generally peacefully resolved.

The U.S. embassy hosted a dinner with prominent Muslim, Christian, and traditional religious leaders, as well as other public figures to promote interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 9.9 million (July 2013 estimate). According to the 2002 census (the most recent official survey; results from the 2013 census have not yet been officially released), the population is 27 percent Roman Catholic, 24 percent Muslim, 17 percent Voodoo, 6 percent other indigenous religious groups, and 5 percent Celestial Christian. Groups constituting less than 5 percent each include Methodists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Bahais, Baptists, Pentecostals, the Unification Church, and Eckankar. Seven percent claim no religious affiliation.

Many individuals who identify themselves as Christian or Muslim also practice Voodoo or other traditional religions.

Most Muslims are Sunni and are concentrated in northern areas. The few Shia are primarily foreign residents and reside in Benin for commercial reasons. Southern areas are more heavily Christian.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

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Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom. The Constitutional Court determines rules on religious matters as part of its mission to guarantee respect for religious freedom. The court has determined that it is illegal to block access of any group to its places of worship, and that discussion and debate regarding religious belief is a protected right of free speech.

The national defense ministry has the authority to intervene in conflicts between religious groups to ensure public order and social peace, provided that intervention complies with the principle of state neutrality in religious affairs.

Persons who wish to form a religious group must register with the interior ministry. Registration requirements are the same for all religious groups.

By law, public schools may not provide religious instruction. Religious groups may establish private schools.

Government Practices

Government officials accorded respect to prominent leaders of all religious groups by attending induction ceremonies, funerals, and other religious celebrations. Police provided security for any religious event upon request.

The government provided yearly financial support of approximately 500 million CFA francs (\$1.05 million), distributed among the principal religious groups (Christians, Muslims, and traditional religions).

State-owned television featured celebrations of religious holidays and honors given to prominent religious leaders, including ordination anniversaries and funerals.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Respect for religious diversity and differing affiliations was widespread at all levels of society and in all regions including within families and communities. However, there were reports of occasional conflict requiring police intervention between Voodoo practitioners and Christians regarding Voodoo initiation

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practices. In general these were peacefully resolved with assistance from local authorities.

Religious leaders worked to ensure tolerance between Christians and Muslims. On May 2, there was a large Ecumenical Day celebration of interreligious cooperation in the historic town of Ouidah.

Interfaith dialogue occurred regularly. The National Framework for Interfaith Dialogue, which included the major religious groups, held quarterly sessions to advance interfaith cooperation. On September 5, the Ministry in Charge of Institutional Relations held a two-day national seminar on interfaith and ecumenical dialogue in Parakou, in the north of Benin. Leaders from traditional religions and Muslim and Christian groups discussed ways to enhance interfaith dialogue toward maintaining national peace and stability.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

In September the embassy hosted a dinner with prominent Muslim, Christian, and traditional religious leaders as well as other public figures to promote interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance in Benin. Participants shared insights on the peaceful coexistence of religious groups in Benin and religions' role in promoting a peaceful and stable democracy.